Deploying teaching assistants to support learning: from models to typologies

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Abstract

The deployment of Teaching Assistants (TAs) to support learning has been the subject of much critical debate, including the particular concern that TAs too often becomes a less skilled replacement for the teacher rather than acting as an additional source of support. Despite efforts to encapsulate the TAs contribution to learning within specific models of deployment, wide variations in practices make the role and its contribution to learning difficult to define. Drawing on data gathered in four secondary schools in England, this paper explores TA deployment practices through six typologies: The Island; The Container; The Separate Entity; The Conduit for Learning; The Partner and The Expert. Illustrated graphically, these bring key elements together in a more contextualised and dynamic way. The paper concludes that the spatial and relational dimensions of deployment warrant more nuanced treatment and that more emphasis on partnership and mutuality and rather less on difference and hierarchy might be productive.

Introduction

The deployment of Teaching Assistants to support learning has been the subject of much critical debate. Drawing on data gathered in four secondary schools in England this paper explores differences in the deployment of Teaching Assistants (TA) to support learning. Moving beyond the well-rehearsed critiques of TA deployment and the preoccupation with roles and models it offers six broader typologies that bring key elements together in a more contextualised and dynamic way: The Island; The Container; The Separate Entity; The Conduit for Learning; The Partner and The Expert. Wide variation in deployment practices makes it difficult to define a precise role for the TA. They may, for example, be deployed with an individual learner or as a general classroom assistant, either within a specific subject area or more widely across the curriculum. As Webster et al. (2013, p.79) point out*: "both in the UK and internationally, there is ambiguity about the TA role in relation to teachers and teaching, and the inclusion of pupils with SEN"*. Previous research conducted internationally raises the particular concern that TAs too often become a less skilled replacement for the teacher, operating as an alternative rather than as an additional or complementary source of support (Blatchford et al, 2009; Devecchi et al. 2012; Webster et al. 2013; Radford et al, 2015; Butt, 2016). TAs can also be seen to occupy a limited, in-between space whether working directly with teachers or not (Devecchi et al. 2012; Lehane 2016). More complex readings point beyond deficits in the TA's skills and knowledge to more multi-factorial, contextualised understandings of the "problem" (Hancock et al. 2010; Webster et al. 2011) with many elements lying outside the control of the TA (Moran & Abbott, 2002; Webster et al. 2013; Mulholland & O'Connor, 2016; Butt, 2016).

Common critiques of TA deployment

Concerns about the increased use of TAs to support learning arise across contexts, despite variations in national policies and models of deployment (Devecchi et al, 2012; Webster et al, 2013, Radford et al, 2015; Lyons et al, 2016; Butt, 2016). Historically it has been a gendered role of low status, associated with unskilled employment and low pay (Cooke-Jones, 2006; Hancock et al, 2010). This is a trend that has continued in England despite the increased diversity of the workforce and opportunities to: enter the profession with relevant prior experience and/or as a graduate (Hancock et al, 2010; Lehane, 2016); to use it as a stepping stone to teaching; to study for additional qualifications while in employment (Hancock et al, 2010); as a move out of teaching. The term TA incorporates a hierarchical binary that automatically positions the teacher as instructor and the TA as subordinate (Devecchi et al, 2012). In England this seems increasingly less justified not only in the light of the increased diversity of TAs outlined above but also because routes in to teaching have become increasingly varied. Much responsibility is now devolved to school level - where practice may be poor - and there has also been an increase in the use of *unqualified teachers* (Ellis, 2010; Maguire, 2014). Interestingly a comparative study conducted by Devecchi et al (2012) identified broadly similar concerns around TA status in Italy, even though TAs operating there have postgraduate qualifications. This suggests not only that the issues go beyond concerns about professional status and access to training but also that we should not automatically assume a positive trickledown effect from the more knowledgeable teacher to the TA (Lehane, 2016). Equal attention needs also to be paid to their contributions within what are often very different learning support scenarios.

The increased use of TAs to support learning has been linked to moves towards inclusion (Moran & Abbott, 2002; Lehane, 2016). Head teachers have been found to value the contribution made by TAs (Radford et al, 2015) and their deployment is

thought to reduce instances of behaviour that might be detrimental to whole class learning (Sharples et al, 2015; p.12). Webster et al (2011) argue that learners typically supported by TAs require access to those with the highest skill levels. Concerns have therefore been raised about how well the deployment of TAs to support inclusion is working in practice (Butt & Lowe, 2012; Devecchi et al, 2012; Webster et al, 2013; Radford et al, 2014; Radford et al, 2015; Butt, 2016; Graves and Williams, 2017; Lehane, 2016). Lyons et al (2016; p.889) highlight the importance of "*a shared commitment to inclusion"* yet Devecchi et al (2012) suggest that difficulties in working relationships sometimes arise around the extent to which teachers feel responsible for or sufficiently equipped to support learners with additional needs. There have been on-going calls for improved training in how to work together (Cremin et al, 2005; Butt, 2016). Research conducted in Ireland by Mulholland and O'Connor (2016; p.1079) highlight the importance of collaboration while also noting that time for this is in short supply – what they term a gap between *willingnes*s and *capacity* that has system level rather than individualised implications.

Those supported by TAs are typically those who are lower attaining and/or with additional learning needs (Blatchford et al, 2009; Blatchford et al, 2010; Butt, 2016). While some studies have suggested that the impact of TA deployment on learning is positive or mixed (Brown & Harris, 2010; Ofsted, 2008; Wilson et al, 2007) research conducted in England as part of the influential DISS study[1] has suggested that TA support is actually detrimental to those supported, with less progress made than experienced by their unsupported peers (Webster et al, 2011; Radford et al, 2014). This

[1] Several of the papers drawn on in this article derive from there and it is important to be aware that these offer and develop a consistent and particular critique see for example: Radford et al., 2014; Rubie-Davies et al (2010); Webster et al (2013).

has been attributed to a number of factors, including the teacher being seen to interact less with supported learners (Webster et al, 2011). This has led to claims that, for the majority of time, the TA has become an alternative teacher for those with a disability rather than working in an additional or complementary role (Butt, 2016; Rubie-Davies et al, 2010). This in turn has given rise to concerns about the adequacy of TAs curriculum knowledge (Radford et al. 2014; Rubie-Davies et al. 2010). This is one reason why time for the teacher and TA to plan together is seen as a critical alternative to expecting TAs to support learning in an ad hoc way (Thomas, 1992; Webster et al, 2013; Radford et al, 2014; Lehane, 2016).

The concern that TAs are increasingly working in a direct pedagogical role has led to calls for training in the use of social-constructivist pedagogical techniques (Radford et al, 2014). Core skills that have been identified include being able to: work as the knowledgeable adult in the zone of proximal development (ZPD) (Vygotsky, 1978); scaffold learning (Wood et al, 1976; Bruner, 1978); use questioning techniques and prompts (Bloom et al, 1956). The aim of the knowledgeable adult is to act as a bridge between the learner's current achievement and the achievement that can be accessed with guidance (Vygotsky, 1978). Such scaffolding incorporates a dynamic process characterised by: the continual adjustment, tailoring and differentiation of responses to the learner (contingency support); gradual withdrawal of support in line with the deepening of understanding and skills (fading); the growing assumption of responsibility by the learner for their own learning (transferring responsibility) (Wood et al, 1976; Van de Pol et al, 2010; Radford et al, 2014). That TAs do not always have recourse to these skills at a sufficiently high level is reflected in the concern that interactions between the TA and learner may focus on task completion, supplying answers rather than developing the learner's capacity for independent learning (Radford

et al, 2014; Rubie-Davies et al, 2010; Webster et al, 2013). Social interaction between peers and the undertaking of shared tasks is also seen to promote learning (Vygotsky, 1978) yet close proximity to the TA may serve to undermine this (Radford et al, 2014).

Common Models of TA deployment

Previous research identifies a range of models of TA deployment. These structure the relationship between the TA and supported learners in different ways, affording different opportunities for learning but also varying levels of autonomy to the TA. Vincett et al (2005) assert that the allocation of TAs to a limited number of teachers affords better opportunities to get to know each other and more positive relationships as well as giving improved access to informal training. Devecchi and Rouse (2010; p.91) take the view that collaboration between the teacher and TA is a key element in the *"effective support for children's learning and well-being"* because it provides space for reflection and builds trust and mutual respect.

Within-class Support

Within-class support involves the deployment of the TA within the classroom context solely under the direction of the teacher and typically the TA will support an individual learner or a small group. This case incorporates a hierarchical relationship between the teacher, TA and learner in that responsibility for the learning remains with the teacher. This is not a fixed model, however, but a set of relationships as it can take different forms in different contexts. While it can include the TA sitting with the learner(s) identified for support, listening to the teacher, clarifying and "providing additional explanation and reinforcement" (Blatchford et al, 2009; p.63) other more fluid and active versions are possible. For example, Vincett, et al (2005; pp.47-50) trialled three different variations of this model: Room Management – where, for a set period of time

the teacher focused intensively on the work of individual learners whilst the TA supported the remainder of the class; Zoning - where adults took responsibility for different geographical areas or zones of the classroom and Reflective Teamwork – where TAs and teachers planned collaboratively in advance how they would work together. All three variations produced improvements in learners' engagement and independent learning and were considered to be empowering of the TA. They involved formalising responsibilities up-front and narrowed the gap between teacher and TA by engendering greater appreciation of each other's complementary contribution.

Models based on withdrawal from the classroom

Withdrawal groups, where the TA is deployed to support a small group of learners away from the classroom and the teacher are also routinely used as a way of providing learning support for learners. The teacher generally continues to have oversight responsibility but much of the immediate responsibility is passed to the TA. To maximise support for learning there needs to be prior discussion and planning between the teacher and TA (Thomas, 1992; Radford et al, 2014; Mulholland and O'Connor, 2016). Withdrawal can cause difficulties for pupils' *"assimilation back into lessons and connecting with class work"* (Blatchford et al, 2009; p.136). Lyons et al (2016) in a study conducted in Canada found that whilst there was "no single linear path in the development and enactment of commitment to inclusion" there was overall a "strong principal commitment" and "teachers who challenged past approaches to educating students separately" (Lyons et al, 2016; p.903).

The autonomous TA

In England the introduction of the Higher Level Teaching Assistant (HLTA) status allows for TAs to take lead responsibility for teaching and learning, including delivering

lessons and team teaching with the teacher (Woodward & Peart, 2005; Wilson et al, 2007; Hancock et al, 2010; Graves, 2012). As such it recognised the potential for the TA to be "the knowledgeable adult" (Vygotsky, 1978) and required additional training. The role was initially contentious as despite assurances that HLTAs are *not* teachers it was seen to further blur these boundaries (Woodward & Peart, 2005; Hancock et al, 2010; Graves, 2012). Equally as Graves and Williams (2017) note there is a risk of blurring the boundaries between TAs who are HLTAs and those who are not. To add to the complexity, non HLTAs are sometimes called upon to work separately with learners in designated learning support areas on tasks that are different from those completed by their peers inside the classroom (Blatchford et al, 2009).

Hancock et al (2010) argue that the creation of the HLTA role acknowledges the increased part played by TAs in teaching and learning and while it affords a level of professionalisation and recognition for higher level skills it is not necessarily reflected in higher pay (Devecchi et al, 2012). As Graves and Williams point out, '*recognition of HLTA status rests solely with senior managers in individual schools who can decide, seemingly arbitrarily, on the relative value of the HLTA and academic qualifications*'. A decline in national interest in the status has fostered considerable variation in approach across local contexts, with individual schools left to determine their own approaches to HLTAs' '*on-going professional development and deployment*' (Graves & Williams, 2017; p.271) .

Research Design

The research reported on in this paper is drawn from an exploratory case study (Thomas, 2011) conducted using a qualitative methodology and involving three suburban, mainstream, state comprehensive schools catering for young people at

secondary level (ages 11-16). The research was designed to provide opportunities to focus in-depth on the interaction between the TAs, teachers and learners as a means of understanding the complexities of the deployment practices involved and their relationship to opportunities for learning. The research began with a pre-lesson observation joint interview with the teacher (n=6) and TA (n=7) of the lesson to be observed. Following the lesson observation both were involved in separate interviews in order to obtain their individual perceptions of the learning support provided in each lesson. The learners supported in each lesson (n=14) were also interviewed in the mode they received support – individually, in pairs or in groups. The research design (shown in Figure A) was similar in each school, the only exception being the one instance where the TA was working autonomously.

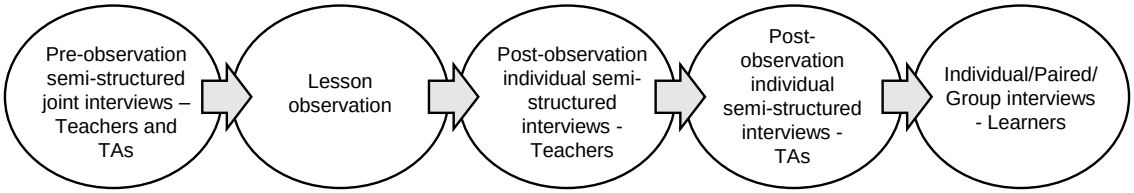

Figure A Overview of research design

Local Authority Support Staff Advisers[2] were consulted as to which schools might be amenable to being involved and of the three that agreed to participate, two had levels of Special Educational Needs and social disadvantage similar to the national average and one had levels below. The schools also differed in their approaches to TA deployment. In two, TAs worked in different subject areas but their allocation to particular classes was fairly regular. In the other, most TAs were allocated to departments, particularly in Maths and English. Seven lesson observations were conducted in total, selected in consultation with staff in each school to cover a range of year groups and subject areas.

[2] This LA role was subsequently removed as part of the national austerity agenda

These lessons became the 'units' and 'sub-units' within the wider case of TA deployment to support learning as illustrated and six have been drawn on in the discussion that follows.

Data summaries were developed as part of the initial analysis and then coded and compared In order to identify themes (Thomas, 2013; p.235). The typologies presented in this paper came out of further iterative engagement with the data and the extant literature. These derive from one-off research encounters and deeper, more contextualised insights might have been obtained had the TAs and teachers been observed working together over a more extended period of time.

Discussion of Findings

The following six typologies have been developed to provide an opportunity to explore the relative contributions of the TA and where applicable, the teacher, in situ: The Island; The Container; The Separate Entity; The Conduit for Learning; The Partner and The Expert. The discussion of each one is supported by a graphical representation that adds further insights into the distinctive and dynamic features of each observed interaction. It is important to note that these typologies relate to the structuring of the interactions and dynamics rather than specific roles. For example, 'The Container' typology addresses the balancing of learning support needs with the containment of a potential 'problem'.

The Island

Butt (2016; p.997) notes that inclusion fails when students are allowed to become islands in mainstream classrooms. This case exemplifies this risk as young people and the TA can be seen to be largely by-passed by the teacher. In this case, the risk seemed to be exacerbated by the positioning of the teacher at the top of the triangle (at the front

of the class) and the placing of the TA between two supported learners (at the base of the triangle) as shown in Figure B:

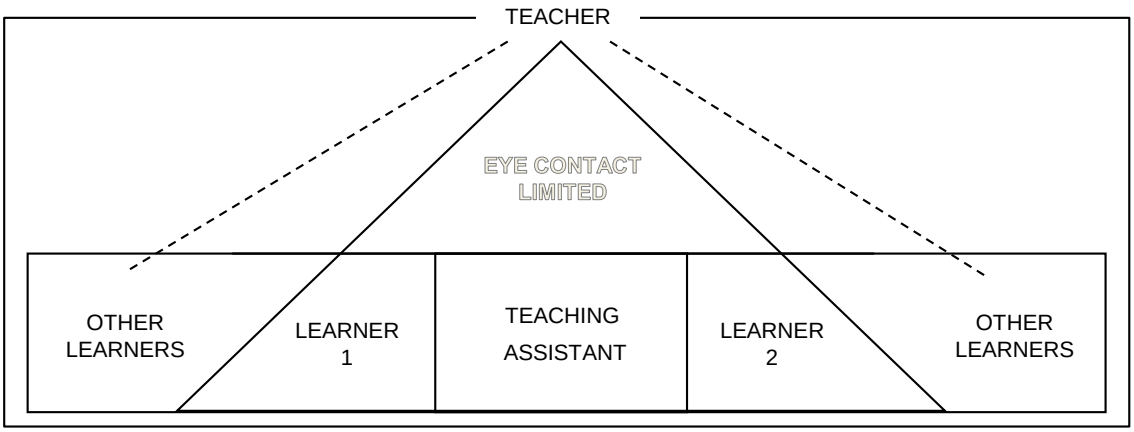

Figure B Central placing of TA between two learners in a Year 9 lesson

Firstly, having provided the TA and supported learners with a worksheet on an oil slick, the teacher was free to focus attention on teaching and supporting the remaining learners outside of the triangle. Little eye contact was made with supported learners so inclusion was minimal. Whilst the supported learners' progress was occasionally checked by the teacher, for the majority of time they worked with the TA to complete the tasks in isolation from the rest of the class. The lesson observation showed that they were almost totally reliant on the TA to explain and summarise key points:

> The TA helped me to understand details of the oil slick. She helped me to remember things so it was easier to answer questions in the end.
>
> (Learner A – post lesson observation paired interview)

The fixed positioning of the TAs between the two learners did little to encourage the development of teamwork between the teacher and TA and she was also central to the discussion between the two learners. As a result she could not easily work with the teacher to support the remaining learners either. During the lesson, the other learners were given the opportunity to discuss their work with peers, monitored and supported

by the teacher. However, the TA remained seated between the supported learners which precluded any opportunity for them to develop their learning through peer interaction or to become more fully active in their learning. This impediment was noted by one of learners:

> Sometimes when I can do the task myself I would like to be left to do it. I prefer to have someone who can guess when I need help....it is irritating when I know what to do and they still want to help me.

(Learner B – post lesson observation group interview)

Recall questions were used by the TA to help the supported learners complete the task, which involved making notes to produce a factual article, something that also did little to encourage independent learning.

This typology draws attention to the way in which supported learners can become an island, working with the TAs as the alternative knowledgeable adult rather than supporting the teacher in a more complementary role. In this particular case, the fixed location of the TA appeared to compound this risk. However, it is the teacher who holds the responsibility for classroom management and inclusion.

The Container

It is recognised that TAs work in ways that are both pedagogical and supportive and the balance that ought to be established between the two as part of a policy to ensure inclusion is one of the things debated in the literature (Butt, 2016; Lyons et al, 2016). In this case the TA was primarily deployed to ensure the learner did not disrupt the lesson and there was minimal focus on providing opportunities for learning. The lesson was in two parts. The first part took place within the classroom and for the second part the class moved to the ICT room. For both parts the learner and TA were seated outside of the teacher's line of vision and the supported learner worked exclusively with the TA.

During the first part, the learner made some contribution by working with the TA on questions from the worksheet provided. In the second part, the teacher had planned for the learner to work with the TA on contributing final comments on his own writing. The TA was tasked with word-processing the results. This two-stage deployment practice is shown in Figure C:

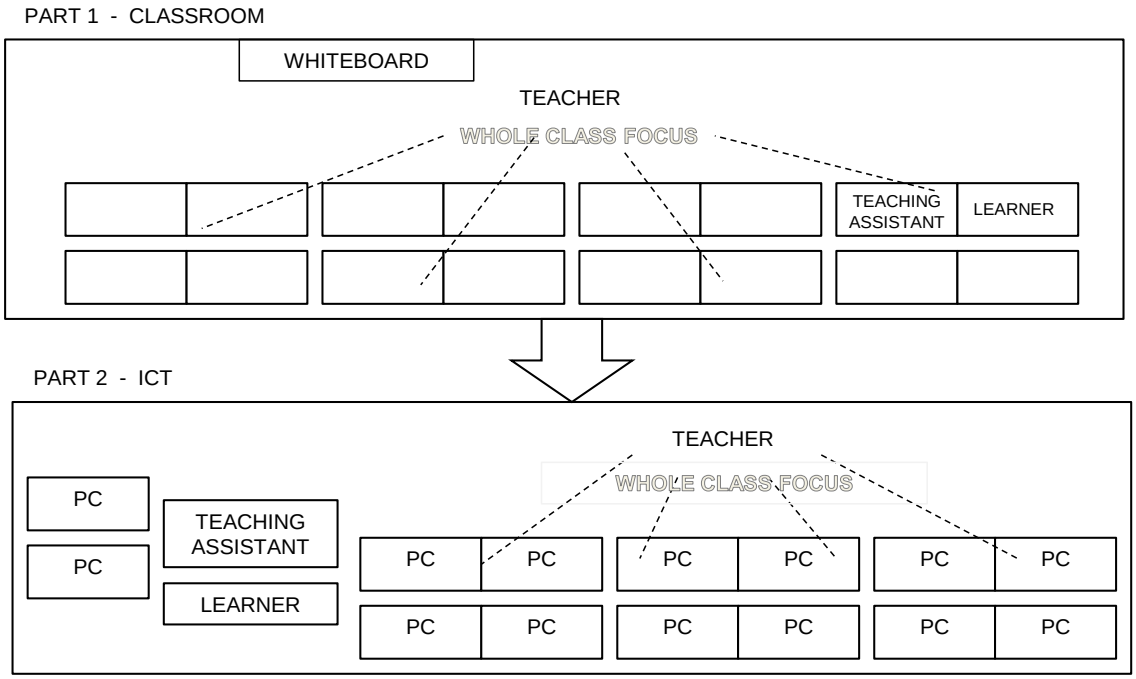

Figure C Two-part lesson

In this activity, both TA and teacher unintentionally reinforced the learner's lack of interest or verbal contributions by independently completing his work for him and not requesting his participation. Afterwards the TA voiced her concern about the learner's lack of attention, particularly in the second half of the lesson when the TA was completing the word-processing for him:

> He can't read a sentence to me while I scribe or word-process so he just has to sit - and it was getting on for about twenty five minutes which is a long time for him. He did start spinning on the chair.
>
> (TA - post lesson observation – Individual interview)

The learner, on the other hand, was pleased to have the work completed for him as it meant that a detention would be avoided:

> It was really good. She did typing for me. She did the mind-map for me. I made suggestions and she wrote them down..... 'I would find it hard (without a TA). I would get detentions.'

(SEN(D) learner- post lesson observation - group interview)

The learner said that he had behaved well and regarded this as an achievement. The teacher also appreciated the TA freeing up her time to support the rest of the class. Without the TA's support she said that she would have:

> spent all the time helping him and I wouldn't have been able to get round to all the pupils they way I did....I had to make parents' evening appointments. If the TA hadn't have been there, I wouldn't have been able to do that because I would have had to stay beside him.

(Teacher - individual post lesson observation interview)

This typology points to how support for learning can become subordinate to other factors such as the need to contain behaviour, enabling the teacher to prioritise other things. In such cases responsibility is transferred from the teacher to the TA but the critique needs to extend beyond the TA as it reflects a wider failure of inclusion.

The Separate Entity

This case provides an example of a TA working autonomously to support learning in a classroom designated as a separate Learning Support area. In the lesson observed the TA provided additional curriculum support to two learners outside the context of the mainstream classroom – one in English, where the TA also had experience of providing in-class support and one in German, a subject in which the TA had no similar expertise. In this case the TA operated exclusively as the "more knowledgeable adult" (Vygotsky,

1978) but also as a separate entity not being under the direct jurisdiction of the classroom teachers. Throughout the lesson the learner receiving support with English was seated facing the TA discussing the work (as shown in Figure D below) but the second learner received no similar support and used the ICT facilities to access information instead. This pattern of interaction remained unchanged until the last five minutes of the lesson when both learners sat at the table and read aloud to the TA.

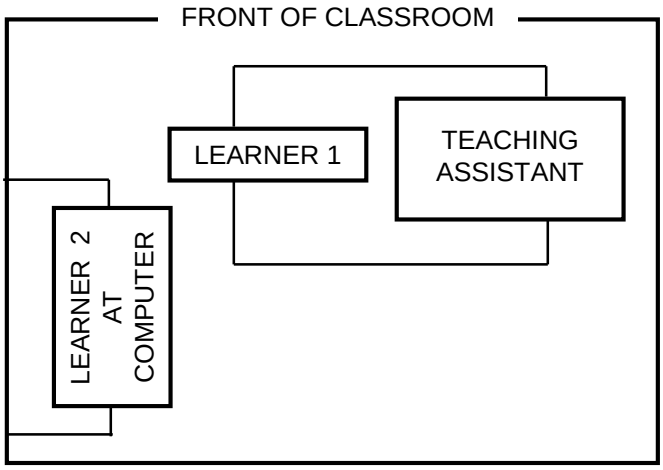

Figure D Separate location – withdrawal/individual support

In the case of the learner being supported with English, despite demonstrating fluency in reading, simplification of the information was necessary before the learner could attempt to answer questions. The TA worked collaboratively with the learner by breaking the text down line by line to facilitate understanding and by asking recall and prompt questions to scaffold the learning. The learner was seen to stop working when the TA checked the progress of the other learner suggesting an inability to work independently. By the end of the lesson, the TA had resorted to task completion, writing notes for this learner to copy up and constructing a plan to support the completion of homework. The TA nevertheless felt that that the learner was a little more prepared for the assessment that would need to be completed for the designated English teacher:

> She is more ready for what she is going to get in class. And she did manage to get some of the sentences or her own but she does rely heavily on repeating what I say to her so....
>
> (TA - post lesson observation - individual interview)

As already noted the TA was unable to support the learner of German due to her lack of knowledge of this curriculum area and being located on the periphery of the classroom in order to access the ICT facilities seemed to further isolate her within the classroom. When she had completed the ICT task, the TA provided a pre-planned and unrelated task constructed by the Learning Support Department to support literacy skills and improve the motivation of struggling or reluctant learners. Although she was motivated to work independently on word processing her ideas for the set topic, the task appeared to be a 'filler' used when no other work was available. While this strategy appeared to be successful in terms of occupying the learner, the need to progress her learning in German in the absence of a knowledgeable adult restricted her learning in ways not shared by the learner of English.

This typology draws attention to the wider context. In schools in England TAs cannot operate as separate entities unless this is institutionally sanctioned and it is clear that the quality and relevance of such learning opportunities will be determined not only by the skills and knowledge of the TA but also by the different needs of those supported and the rationale for withdrawing them from mainstream classes.

The Conduit for Learning

Resistance to the withdrawal of young people from the classroom relates in part to concerns that learners are being separated from the teacher's expertise, the TA not necessarily having sufficient expertise to fill this gap (Butt, 2016). In this particular case these risks appeared to have been mitigated by the quality of the collaboration between

the teacher and TA, something that was said to have arisen out of the experience of working closely together over time and to have provided access to informal training. The lesson began with the teacher explaining the lesson objectives to the whole class and the TA. Four pre-selected learners were then withdrawn from the class to work with the TA in a different location. Having been withdrawn from the main class the selected learners were then seated as shown in Figure E. The spaces between each of the desks facilitated the TA's full access to each learner when circulating the group.

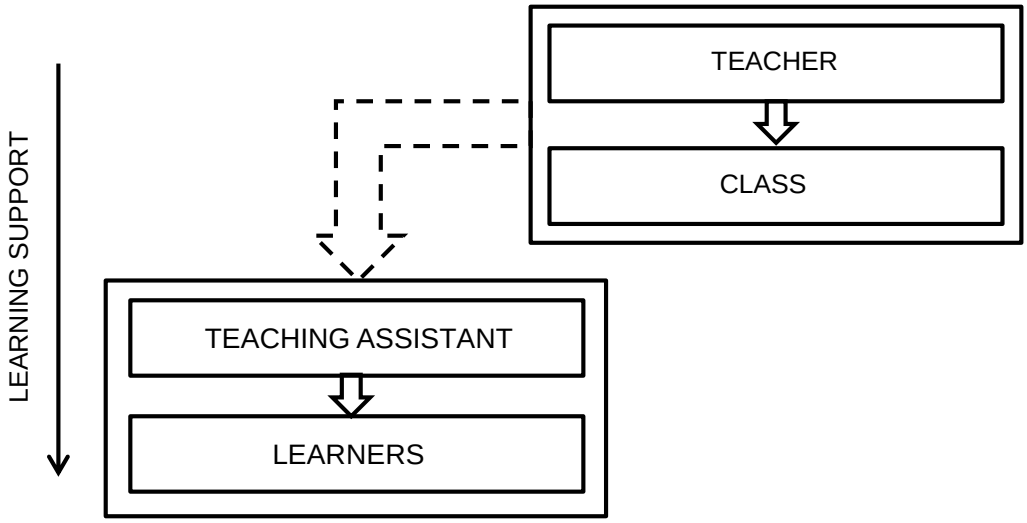

Figure E The TA working out of the classroom under the direction of the teacher

During the course of the lesson the TA demonstrated skill in using one-to-one questioning to promote initial thinking and focus learners on completing a writing frame in order to scaffold the construction of a detailed response to the novel. She began with recall questions such as “do you remember what Valentine (the main character) was like?” As learners were able to respond to these affirmatively, they gained confidence and became more proactive. The TA then moved to questions which began with statements - “Valentine is a caring person; why?” When reasoned answers were given, the TA’s questions became more open-ended and began to focus on the task in hand – for example, “how are we going to write this?” The TA gave thinking time to encourage and facilitate the learners’ responses. This procedure was repeated

throughout the lesson on a one-to-one basis, with some learners making decisions as to what to write. Their responses provided evidence of the importance of questioning in promoting active thinking skills (Malaguzzi, 1998).

The TA also encouraged the use of "psychological tools" (Vygotsky, 1978) such as writing frames and individual whiteboards to develop learning. Learners used these to note ideas, construct sentences and check spelling. The TA also discouraged any over-dependence on receiving help by using strategies such as action charts which outlined the steps a learner should take independently before asking for help. The TA used phrases such as "so you spent all that time waiting for me when you could have done this for yourself?" to discourage over-reliance on support. The TA also demonstrated how learning could be developed by the withdrawal of support (fading) at key moments with particular learners (Wood et al, 1976).

This was exemplified when, observing the growing independence of one learner, the TA provided less support. The teacher also made explicit that learners should not become intellectually over-dependent on receiving help. He said:

> Those (TAs) who should be with a statemented pupil are better used on occasions on a more general basis - if the statemented pupil can do a task independently then using the TAs more generally will avoid over-dependence.
>
> (Teacher - post lesson observation - individual interview)

A key point which emerged was that despite the potential for marginalisation, withdrawal from the main class was not in this case a marginalising experience. This was in part because the teacher did not operate it as a fixed pattern of practice as groups selected for working in the withdrawal groups were different each time and not selected in terms of highest need. Furthermore, the TA was skilled in social constructivist approaches that promoted active, intellectual development having observed the teacher

modelling such approaches and used this informal on-the-job training to develop her own practice.

The TA was seen to be able to support learning relatively autonomously in part because of the quality of the collaborative relationship that had developed with the teacher. This relationship included opportunities for voluntary, joint planning of lessons:

> If I am free at the end of the lesson and he's free we will sit down and he says to me - "tomorrow we will be doing....."

(TA - pre-lesson observation joint interview)

The TA also explained that the teacher had also actively supported her involvement in assessment:

> He gives me the records so that I can see - how - when - they do their little tests...they have improved and I do get to see their targets.....sometimes we set targets together...so I do see their progress.

(TA - pre-lesson observation joint interview)

The quality of the collaboration between the teacher and the TA is identified as a key issue in the literature (Cremin et al, 2005; Devecchi and Rouse, 2010; Mulholland and O'Connor, 2016). It is even more important when young people are being withdrawn from the classroom. This typology suggests that where TAs have the skills and knowledge to be effective conduits for the teacher, this can be a complementary rather than a lesser experience.

The partner

Hancock et al (2010) note the tendency for HLTAs to work as team-teachers rather than in a more hierarchical relationship and this case provided an example of the teacher and HLTA supporting learners with identical activities on an equal basis in the classroom.

This is reminiscent of the “room management,” model that Cremin et al. (2005) suggest encourages independence and reduces any stigma around support. In this example, the pattern of interaction between teacher, HLTA and learners was in two parts. The first was a starter activity set up by the teacher and supported by the HLTA. For the main activity, the HLTA operated in a pedagogical and support role with half the class while the teacher worked with the other half as shown in Figure F:

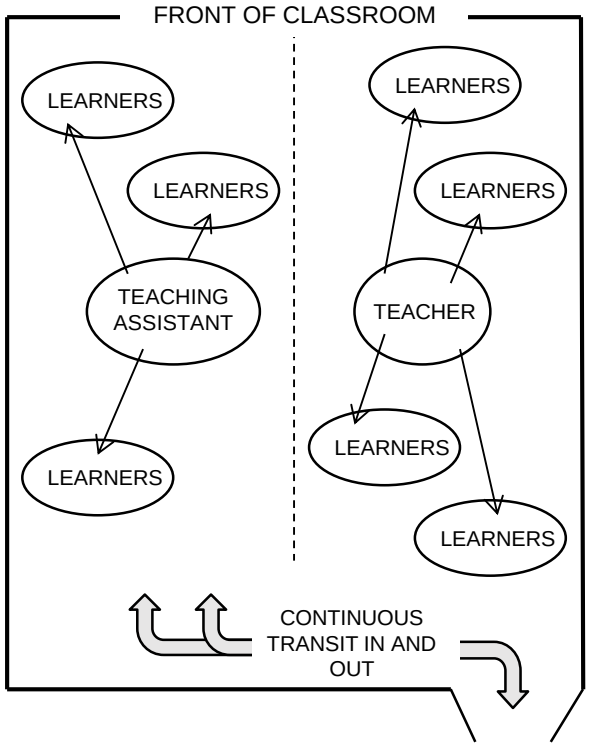

Figure F Teacher and HLTA team teaching

During the opening phase of the lesson the HLTA provided support as learners worked in small groups on practical tasks which involved finding answers for themselves. This was a ‘bottom’ set and no learner was identified as being the specific focus for learning support. The team approach modelled by the teacher and the HLTA appeared to reinforce co-operation between learners who also operated in small teams. During the main activity, learners moved around both inside and outside of the classroom. Learning was scaffolded by both the teacher and the HLTA:

> When we walked around, we made different measurements. The TA and the teacher showed us different lengths and then we got to measure things for ourselves.....I understood what a kilometre was when the teacher and TA used a metre length to show me - then I could see how long it was…
>
> (Three learners -post lesson observation group interview)

This freedom facilitated active thinking skills and co-construction of knowledge as they completed tasks and discussed their findings with each other. The HLTA thought that the learners had made progress as evidenced by the understanding that they had gained of how to use the mathematical measuring tools. Her view was that "*for a class like that, it was a very good lesson.....because it was hands-on they will remember things they learnt."* This typology highlights the importance of the HLTA"s curriculum knowledge and the strength of the relationship established with the teacher over time. It evidences the value of a partnership where responsibility is both distributed and understood, leading to a form of support that allows the TA to act in ways that are additional, alternative *and* complementary.

The expert

As previously discussed, a dominant critique is that the lesser skilled TA has in some way superseded the superior knowledge of the teacher. In this case a retired Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator operated as the TA within a mainstream English classroom. The patterns of interaction occurring within the lesson were threefold. First, the teacher presented from the front. This was followed by group work. Later in the lesson the TA circulated the class and supported learners more generally. The TA's main task, however, was to support a specific group of four learners identified as having additional needs. The positioning of the TA and learners for the main part of the lesson is shown in Figure G. The side-positioning of the group of lower attaining learners with

the TA situated on the periphery of the lesson suggests withdrawal from the main class despite being physically present.

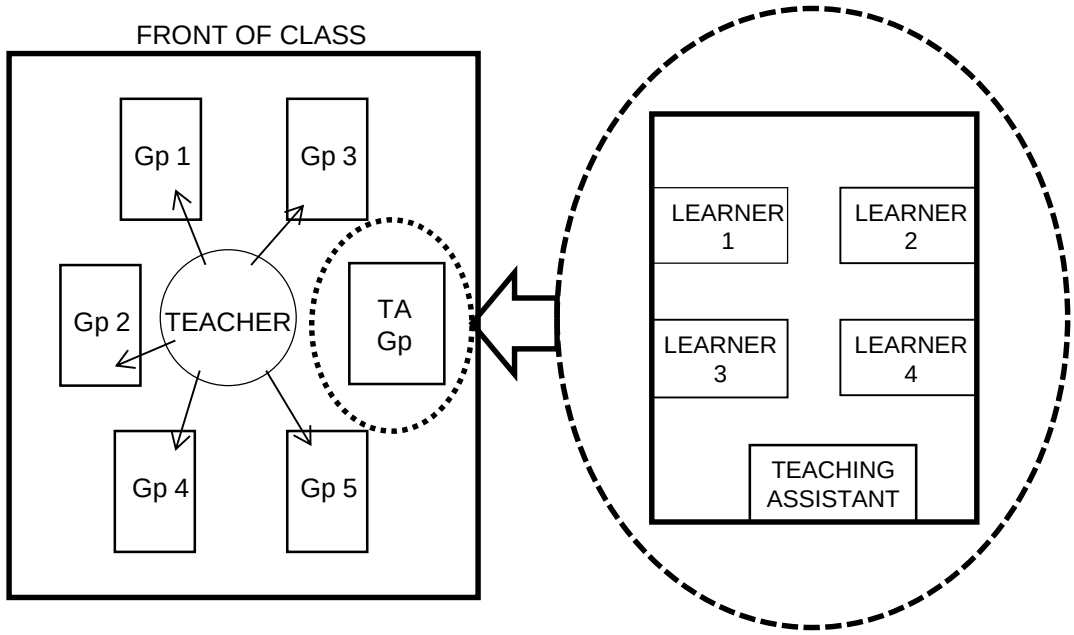

Figure G Side positioning of supported group

The TA was later deployed to support the learning of other groups and also took part in an interview role play with the teacher. The variety of strategies observed promoted inclusion in whole-class learning, both of the TA and the learners she was directed to support. She asked the learners open-ended questions, for example, “Do you all agree with that? “Why?” and “What do you think?” to enable learners to construct their own questions. Scaffolding was evident in the ways in which she promoted peer interaction by providing guidance at key points in their discussion - for example, “Is that a good question? Why? What does everyone think?” and withdrawing support as they responded to this and began to work co-operatively again to produce their own questions.

Importantly, the quality of the relationship between the teacher and the TA appeared to support both teaching and learning. The relatively inexperienced teacher had planned for the class to construct questions for interviewing a celebrity couple. She had decided

as a differentiation strategy that the TA's group would work on different types of questions rather than those appropriate to interviewing. This made it difficult for them to participate in the interview activity being undertaken by the rest of the class. The TA noted later that "asking the questions got a bit muddly for them" and that, where possible, she had helped them adapt the questions to focus on interviewing the celebrity couple. In so doing she had supported the teacher's lesson plan and contributed to supported learners achieving the identifying learning outcomes for all learners. The skill and experience of the TA was seen to be an important element in promoting learning given the potential for marginalisation built into the teacher's deployment strategy.

In the initial group work, the TA demonstrated skill in managing one learners' potentially disruptive behaviour by strategic questioning - "what do we need at the end of a question?" When he responded with the right answer, she provided praise and, as a result, he participated in reading aloud from the worksheet and contributed ideas for questions in the group work. His participation and self-efficacy were positively reinforced by the TA's praise and by the end of the lesson he was able to produce independently a definition of open and closed questions by moving sentences around on the interactive whiteboard in front of the class. In the post lesson observation interview, the teacher noted that this learner had moved to independent question construction culminating in his success in the whiteboard activity:

> he was able to do that...he often finds it difficult to write a word - and I think that having him in a small group meant that he had the confidence to come up and do the interactive whiteboard activity, whereas normally he wouldn't join in.
>
> (Teacher - post lesson observation individual interview)

This case once again highlights the importance of the relationship between the teacher and the TA, reflected in the willingness of the less experienced teacher to capitalise on

the greater experience of the TA but also the TA's professionalism in supporting the lesson objectives while trying also to facilitate the inclusion of the supported learners in whole class learning. While the relationship between knowledge and skills is sometimes assumed to relate to a hierarchical binary, this typology recognises that these can be differently distributed across roles and that the more expert adult can sometimes be the TA.

Conclusion

This paper highlights a number of important issues relevant to the deployment of TAs to support learning. It is clear that there is considerable variation in roles and practices and that this range is not always adequately captured in the discussion of specific models. Indeed the variety and fluidity of the dynamics occurring within them is such that even very similar models of deployment can be seen to afford very different opportunities for learning. To add to the complexity, it is also possible for a lesson to incorporate a combination of models. What the graphical representations included here begin to suggest is the importance of drawing together the spatial and relational dimensions of TA deployment. They also point strongly to the need for more nuanced, less binary understandings of the relative contributions of TAs and teachers, informed by fuller appreciation of the (often challenging) contexts in which they work.

Conceptualising the relationship between TA and teacher as a partnership based on mutuality rather than difference and hierarchy would also mean investing in approaches that better support the development of such relationships. In the absence of more formal opportunities for professional development, this might include promoting more consistency in both contact and support with a view to strengthening knowledge of both the curriculum and the supported learner, making it easier to scaffold learning. These cases clearly show the role of the more knowledgeable adult shifting between teachers

and TAs much more fluidly than is consistent with the idea of fixed roles This suggests a task that far exceeds the need for simple clarification of roles, important though this is. Regardless of the concerns expressed about the extent to which TAs have/can/should replace the teacher there are also clearly occasions when they do - including at times when the teacher is present - and it is therefore useful to frame these debates around divisions of responsibility, recognising that this ultimately resides beyond the TA even when they are operating alone. Butt and Lowe (2012; p.209) identify TAs as being subject to ever increasing demand. The deployment of TAs raises important questions about the value we attach to both learners and TAs and why we continue to fail to deliver the conditions that would maximise the benefits of their support.

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